

# Shin Buddhism in Modernity\*

By John Paraskevopoulos

As is the case with many religious traditions in the modern world, the future of Shin (the largest school of Buddhism in Japan) is looking somewhat precarious. It finds itself subject to a host of difficulties and pressures which, if not tackled through a renewed focus on what is most essential in its teachings, will lead to it floundering and struggling for relevance. In the midst of so much confusion and acrimony in the *sangha*, it is easy to overlook the joy and comfort afforded by the teachings of Shinran (1173-1263), particularly the great insights they give us into the nature of reality and the human condition. One should never lose sight of these foundational aspects and must always remain vigilant in expounding them with confidence.

We will commence with an overview of the challenges facing Shin, followed by some reflections on its future prospects in an aggressively secular world where spiritual values are constantly under attack and fighting for survival.

Many who are contemplating this path, including some adherents already on it, feel distinctly uncomfortable with what they consider to be its similarities to Christianity and, perhaps, theism generally. Of course, this is only a problem for those who completely reject theistic religion in every respect. The first observation one can make is that there are, in fact, many significant and far-reaching differences between Shin and Christianity which are not stressed as often as they should be. While the aggressive pursuit of novelty by certain scholars sometimes tends towards an immoderate emphasis on differences alone, these must nevertheless be acknowledged where they are real. On the flipside, however, it is surely obvious that there are also some striking parallels

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\*This is an abridged version of a keynote address presented to the Buddhist Churches of America in August 2017.

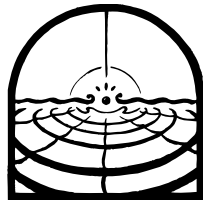
between them in virtue of sharing a religious outlook grounded in a number of universal realities pertaining to questions of faith, liberation and transcendence.

People often remark that they do not consider themselves religious even though they are very interested in 'spirituality'. There is clearly a widespread view that spirituality is 'good', because somehow pure and elevated, but that religion — which is about dogma, organization and control — is largely corrupted and therefore 'bad'. While such an attitude is understandable, I think it represents a false dichotomy. After all, Shin is, without doubt, an organized religion but this has never detracted from its function as a profound spiritual vehicle. To be sure, religious bodies can be hidebound and inflexible in their outlook; they can sometimes kill the spirit in obsessing over the 'letter' but this is an inevitable consequence of imposing flawed human structures and behaviors on a reality that is inconceivable, as our Buddhist masters would say. But each religion also has a preserving function and that is to safeguard the body of wisdom handed down to us through an abundance of sacred forms, such as our rich liturgical practices, and in the maintenance of doctrinal orthodoxy which keeps the teachings alive and accessible to ordinary people.

Assuredly we may, at times, find ourselves frustrated or disappointed by the occasional shortcomings of priests or ecclesiastical bureaucrats but most do try, to the best of their abilities, to retain something of what is most valuable in that which has been transmitted; both the teaching itself and the cultural ambience that pervades it. We cannot function as mere ethereal entities since we are embodied flesh and blood human beings who need tangible forms with which to anchor our spiritual lives. Now this problem is not unique to Shin — every religion faces this tension between its forms and their relationship to the formless — but ditching the former in favor of an absolute focus on the latter is perilous in that it leads to a gradual dissipation of a tradition's integrity. These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. They reinforce each other and provide a balanced approach, along with the appropriate supports we require to maintain our spiritual equilibrium.

Shin Buddhism is assuredly a religion in that it manifests all the classic features of a religious faith: belief in a higher reality, degrees of posthumous existence, salvation, worship, ritual, devotion, reliance on

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